A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 21

A day later, Khan's fleet arrived half a light year outside of the Zygerria system. Esera needed one of Khan's military ships for her plan to work. After reviewing the list, she settled on a *Recusant*-class destroyernamed *Encounter*. Against other names like *Auspicious Fortune*, *Deductible Dawn*, and *Guardian of Solvency,* its simplicity stood out to her. Those names also marked Khan's destroyers as a pre-war flight of ships. *Encounter* had seen better days; there were obvious patches across its hull, and several gaping holes where turbolasers had burned through.

"This is a temporary loan," Khan reminded her, as she stood at the boarding ramp of a *Sheathipede* shuttle. "I am not giving you this ship."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Esera said, pushing R8 into the shuttle. "I already live on *Invisible Hand*, remember?"

"Yes. Your guards are also a temporary loan. Try not to lose them, B2s do not come cheaply." Khan nodded to the six super battle droids that were to accompany her.

"Funny," said Esera, "they never gave us much more trouble than the B1s. I think you guys are getting scammed."

Khan stared at her, hands clasped, photoceptors dimming, as if he had narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "Keep an open channel on your communicator," he said.

"Yes, I know," Esera said. "Can I go now?" Khan waved her off.

Esera didn't like the *Sheathipede*. It was a stripped-down ex-civilian model, roomy and still bearing traces of the luxury its Trade Federation owners had once traveled in. There was an empty miniature bar that had once held drinks, and now held emergency oxygen masks. The mix of features was off-putting, Esera preferred the utilitarian, purpose-built Republic shuttles. Though, she wouldn't have been opposed to sampling the legendary decadence of upper class Nemoidian tastes. Just once, to see what it was like. It wasn't like she'd enjoy it or anything.

Encounter, however, was anything but roomy and luxurious. As soon as she stepped out into the little hangar, Esera was greeted by one of the most run-down, grimy, decrepit ships she'd ever seen. *And I thought it looked bad on the outside*...

Walking through the cramped, narrow and barely-lit halls brought up memories of the darkest depths of the crystal caves on Ilum. Esera forced herself to breath normally, as there was no risk of cave-in aboard a ship. All the keypads to the doors were just below her hip level, and what few windows she passed were centered awkwardly low on the walls. When she got to the bridge, very little changed. The bridge was semi-circular room offering a one hundred and eighty degree view outside, cluttered with display screens, control stations, exposed wiring, and all manner of technology, but the ceiling was so low she could reach up and touch it. "Well, that's a first," Esera said, putting her palm against the metal above her. Grievous would have had to stoop severely to fit in here. The droids were craning their necks, too. *This ship was built for the Commerce Guild before the war, it was made for a Gossam crew,* Esera realized. *No wonder I feel tall in here! I'd like to see Thamyris and his clones trying to get around this ship.*

The droids on the bridge were looking at her. "Are you the new captain?" asked the yellow-marked command droid.

"No," said Esera. "Just a passenger. My name is Esera Komara, I'm a diplomat acting on behalf of General Grievous. Your new mission is to take me to Zygerria."

"Roger roger," said the droid, before turning to his bridge staff. There was a blue flash, and *Encounter* jumped to hyperspace. Esera had barely made it off the bridge to change into some more fitting clothes when 'her' ship appeared above a brown and blue planet. "Miss Komara, the mission is accomplished," reported the droid.

"Very good."

"We're being hailed."

"Tell them we're a diplomatic mission from Raxus. I will be with them shortly."

"Roger roger."

As a passenger, Esera figured that she'd been automatically given access to any one of the meager passenger suites aboard, a guess she soon found to be correct. Safe behind a closed door, Esera changed into the formal Raxus-style clothing that would be expected of a wealthy, educated, and well-connected Raxian diplomat. Esera was neither wealthy nor educated, but at least she had a few connections. A pair of minor politicians and a moody, dangerous cyborg at her back were better than the nothing she'd started this journey with.

By some miracle of fate, the Raxian accent was remarkably similar to the upper-class Coruscanti accent that Esera had come to use for day-to-day life in her youth, so she wouldn't have to worry about being called out as a fraud. Like the rest of the wardrobe that had been insistently given to her, the dress was in the traditional Raxian style, long and slim, and colored in what Esera considered to be a tasteful shade of blue-grey. This one was a happy medium between the very conservative 'old lady' look, as the Sephi girls called it, and a more youthful, revealing style that they enjoyed. This dress was *supposed* to

fit snugly around her hips, which would have embarrassed her, but she was still recovering from her recent ill-health. Esera tightened the elegant but mostly-decorative belt around her waist and hoped the Zygerrians wouldn't be judging her sense of fashion. Then came the appropriate amount of jewelry for a dignitary, including a little Separatist hexagon pin, and finally, the real challenge: makeup. The Sephi twins had spent a long time on this subject, and Esera hoped she did them proud.

When she looked in the mirror, Esera barely recognized herself. Where once a hollow, sickly nervous girl had looked back at her in the reflection, now she saw a mature young woman who looked ready to stand beside the galaxy's most powerful politicians. Hopefully, she would stand with the likes of Padme Amidala and Bail Organa, and not Orn Free Taa and the late Sheev Palpatine. "Master, if you could see me now..." Esera murmured. She had the droid commander inform the Zygerrians she was coming down, and went to her shuttle. *This is so weird,* she thought, looking at the battle droids that were for once protecting her and not trying to kill her. Not that she had much confidence in their ability to protect her.

Her flight to the surface went without incident. She smirked as she hid her lightsaber in one of R8's compartments. No one would ever think to look there. The shuttle plugged into the local networks, and Esera reviewed the weather at the capital. *Twenty-six degrees, eighty-two percent humidity! Finally, somewhere where it isn't winter!* She was so excited to experience a different season for the first time in eight months that Esera momentarily forgot the purpose of her visit. The shuttle touched down, and the ramp dropped. Esera took a deep breath, and strode down, flanked by R8 and her B2 battle droid escort. She was awaited.

"Lady Komara," said an armored Zygerrian at the head of his own troop, who bowed deeply. "I am Captain Rajim Armin. On behalf of King Atai and the whole Zygerrian Empire, we offer you a most warm welcome."

"It certainly is warm," Esera said, as the hot, muggy Zygerrian air overpowered the comparatively chilly recycled air of the shuttle cabin. *Eighty-two percent humidity might be a little too much,* she realized. For a few seconds, she waited for instructions, before it occurred to her that she was the one in charge here. "Take me to the palace, Captain, if you'd please."

"Right away, Lady Komara. We have made preparations for your stay," said Captain Armin. He ushered her off the landing pad, and up towards the blue-painted pyramid that must have been the royal palace. The whole city was painted in unusual colors. The walls were blue too, but the buildings surrounding them were orange, red, green, and brown. Thankfully, the palace was air conditioned, and Esera was quietly grateful she wouldn't be sweating through her nice new dress any time soon. The Zygerrian guards eyed the super battle droids clanking along behind her with caution. *I guess these things are scary if you're not a Jedi,* thought Esera. *Even clones struggle with them, one on one.* She'd only have four in the palace if things went beyond badly, though, two had to stay with the shuttle.

They went up a lift, and Armin showed her to her quarters, and then summoned two girls, a blue-skinned Twi'lek and a red-skinned Togruta. Esera frowned, and wondered if she was one of the girls from Kiros that Kenobi, Skywalker, and Tano might have missed on their visit to this empire. After all, even half a percent of fifty thousand was still two hundred and fifty, well within the margin of error for such an operation. The girls shied away when they saw the towering B2s standing guard at the door.

"Faera, Yashar, serve Lady Komara in whatever way she desires. She is your mistress for the duration of your stay," said Armin.

Esera caught herself before objecting. *I am a Raxian lady, without my handmaidens,* she thought. *Of course I'll accept servants.* "Thank you," said Esera, eyeing their shock-collars. The ugly things stood out in jarring contrast to their pretty outfits.

"They won't dare to act out, my lady," Armin said.

He's got sharp eyes, Esera thought. "I didn't think they would. It's just... unusual, where I'm from."

"Ah, yes," Armin said, nodding, "our *peculiar institution,* as you Raxians call it, can be a bit of a... shock, to off-worlders."

Did he just make a joke? The captain's angular face hadn't even so much as twitched with a hint of a smile. "You could say that," said Esera. "Will the King be seeing me any time soon?"

"You'll be meeting him before dinner tonight," Armin said. "Until then, we invite you to settle in and make yourself at home. An envoy from our allies in the Confederacy has but to ask, and she will receive." Armin bowed again. "If that will be all, my lady, I have my duties to attend to."

"Yes, that will be all, thank you." The Zygerrian retreated, leaving the two slave-girls standing awkwardly outside Esera's quarters, trying not to look at her, or each other, or R8, and especially not at the four huge super battle droids. "Don't just stand there, come in," Esera told them. The girls scrambled to obey. "Faera and Yashar, wasn't it?"

"Yes, my lady," said the Twi'lek, Faera.

"Yes, my lady," said Yashar, the Togruta. *How old are these kids?* Esera wondered, before deciding to ask right out.

"How old are you two?"

"Eighteen," said Faera.

"Twenty-one," said Yashar.

Esera blinked, once again reminded of just how young she really was. "Not so much younger than me, then," she lied. "I'll be honest with you two. I'm rather independent-minded, it drives my-" *I'm not thinking about you, Grievous!* "-father crazy. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with you."

"Anything you wish, my lady," Faera said, head bowed demurely. Yashar said nothing.

"R8, scan this room for bugs," Esera told the astromech. R8 beeped in affirmation, and an antennae popped out of his dome. The slave-girls exchanged a concerned look. *They think I'm going to do something vile to them,* thought Esera, her stomach twisting in preemptive alarm. R8 beeped again, and shook his dome. "It looks like they're not listening in. I will be even more honest, now. Neither I, nor the people of Raxus, nor indeed a certain authority in the Confederacy's government, have any love for this planet's *peculiar institution.* You have nothing to fear from me. And if my mission succeeds..." No, it was best not to get their hopes up before anything happened. "Well, never mind about that. I need to unpack my things. I'm not sure how much help you'll be, I've only got clothes for three days and don't expect I'll be here for even that long."

Faera at least was insistent about playing the part of the dutiful slave. The Twi'lek girl must have been here a long time, to feel self-conscious about standing around doing nothing. Yashar just lurked in a corner, looking out a window at the city below. If Esera thought her lodgings on the *Invisible Hand* were cushy, this suite in the palace changed her definition of it. She had a more than full-size bed, a walk-in closet, and a washroom so big that there was a bathtub she could physically walk down into it, a luxury Esera had never dreamed of experiencing. The suite came with a sunny room that seemed to serve no purpose other than to sit in. Was it a meditation chamber? In any case, meditating would be risky here, not that it did much good anymore, with the Force as disturbed as it was. Esera took a seat and went over the contingency plan again.

The later winter sun sat low on the horizon on Raxus. Nute Gunray, once Viceroy of the Trade Federation and now Minister of Finance for the Confederacy of Independent Systems, glared out his office window. *Just fifteen more minutes and the day is over,* he thought. And what a day it'd been. Rune Haako, the new Viceroy, had been calling him all day for his advice on how to handle the new assets being transferred to the Federation.

"I'm retired!" Gunray had finally snapped. "This is your job now, Rune! You need to stand on your own!"

He hadn't meant to be so cross with his old friend, but there came a time when every man had to spread his own wings, so to speak. It was Haako's turn to shine, after a lifetime in Gunray's shadow. Surely, though, it looked good to the investors that the Trade Federation had tripled its assets overnight under Haako's leadership. *And it's all thanks to Grievous,* thought Gunray. He'd cleverly sidestepped the issue of nationalization by handing over the confiscated assets of the traitors to both the Trade Federation and Techno Union. The Commerce Guild, the Corporate Alliance, the Banking Clan, and the rest were reeling, their stocks were in free-fall and their representatives crying up a storm on Coruscant. Gunray's job was to make sure the transfers all went off without a hitch. He did wonder what was going to become of Shu Mai and the others, but Grievous would reveal their fates when he was ready to, and not a moment sooner.

The intercom rang. "Sir," his secretary said, "there's someone here to see you."

"Who could it possibly be?" sighed Gunray.

"He says General Grievous sent him."

Well, yes, that's just what someone would say to expedite their requests. "Very well, send him in."

In came a human man, bearded, balding, a little overweight, dressed nicely but with an unremarkable sense of style. He was someone utterly forgettable. "Hello, Minister," the man said, extending a hand. "I'm Clothar Aclinde."

Gunray shook his hand, trying not to cringe when he felt moist, oily human skin. "Welcome, Mister Aclinde. How can I help you?"

"Well, it's quite simple, Minister." Aclinde reached inside his jacket, and took out some kind of badge. It bore the Separatist hexagon, with the words *Office of Safety and Information* circled around it. "I'm here to arrange my department's funding."

"I don't know of this office," said Gunray.

"It's very new," said Aclinde. He swiped his badge over the computer scanner on Gunray's desk, and on the screen all the verification Gunray could have asked for appeared. "And not exactly public, you see. Our existence is revealed on a need-to-know basis for the moment, and you need to know, Minister. Someone's got to pay my men's salaries."

"Yes, of course," Gunray agreed. What exactly did this guy and his office do? Safety and information? Was he some kind of governmental network security techie?

"Here is my invoice for this quarter's budget," said Aclinde, taking out a datapad and sending everything over to Gunray's computer.

"Are you joking?" asked Gunray, when he saw it. "Your little office needs ten million credits per quarter?"

"There are security risks and liabilities in our line of work," said Aclinde. *Yes, this one is network security,* thought Gunray. That hundred million must have been for legal fees. He sighed again, and gave his signature where needed.

"You understand I will have to report all this to Grievous, right?" he asked.

"As you should. Now, I was never here, and my office doesn't exist as far as the public is concerned," said Aclinde, turning to leave. At the door, he paused, and turned around. "One last thing, Minister Gunray. I've heard that embezzlement is often how Nemoidian officials pay themselves. I... wouldn't recommend on doing that, from now on."

"I would never dream of it," said Gunray. *Why so secret?* he wondered, before typing up his report of the transaction to Grievous. It wasn't his business, though, best not to think about it. Soon, his day would be over, and he'd be free to watch the latest episode of an embarrassingly trashy but oddly addictive Raxian holodrama.

It had been afternoon when Esera's shuttle touched down, so she didn't have too long to wait until dinner. Captain Armin returned to fetch her, and two of Esera's battle droids followed her to the King's private dining hall. The monarch himself was already there, a tall and well-built middle-aged man; his fur was so red it was nearly purple, but there were streaks of grey in it. Also in the room were two other Zygerrians, boys who couldn't quite be called men yet, but looking akin to the King in their promise of strength and stature.

"Your highness, I present Lady Esera Komara of Raxus, envoy of the Confederacy of Independent Systems," announced Armin.

"Ah, right on time as always, Armin," said the King, in a deep and guttural voice. He approached Esera, and clasped her right hand in his own. To his credit, he didn't so much as blink when Esera's hand twitched on its own accord. "I am King Atai of the house of Molec, and these are my sons, Hordem and Sono."

"Well met, your highness, my lords," said Esera, bowing her head to all three. "I'm pleased you were able to meet with me on such short notice."

"Your government was instrumental in enabling our Empire to resume its operations at full capacity," said the King, gesturing for everyone to take a seat at a long, but not uncomfortably so, table. Esera tried not to cringe at Atai's words. Dooku truly had been a Sith. "You have my deepest condolences for the loss of Count Dooku. We were terribly upset to learn of his murder. At least that horrid Skywalker paid for his crimes at last! Did you know he killed Queen Miraj, right in front of me? Wherever that stinking Jedi went, the corpses of the innocent were left behind."

Dooku's the one who killed her, Esera thought. *And you're the one who called Dooku in, knowing he'd kill her for becoming so smitten with Skywalker.* Grievous had heard it from the man's own mouth, that'd been a part of her briefing on her mission. "Yes, Skywalker got what was coming to him," said Esera. Atai's sons nodded along. They couldn't have been more than two or three years younger than her. There was a pang of worry in her heart at what might become of these boys if Esera was forced to use the contingency she and Khan had in place. *Slaver family or not, the crimes of the father are not the crimes of son, right?* That's what her master would have said.

"I'm sure you'd love to get down to business, Lady Komara," the King said. "But I've had a long day of ruling and I'd prefer not deal with interstellar politics until the morning, if that's quite alright with you."

"Of course," said Esera. *I want to try that bathtub after dinner, myself.*

"I'd rather get to know the woman I'm dealing with."

"Ah. Well, here I am," Esera said, spreading her hands.

"Here you are," echoed Atai, with a smile that just barely avoided showing his fangs. "Grievous must be smarter than he lets on, if he knows the only soft spot I have in my heart is reserved for beautiful women."

"Oh, um, thank you," Esera said, as she felt her face begin to burn. *Stop blushing, you silly girl!* Esera told herself. *You're a diplomat and a noble lady, you're used to this kind of flattery!* But no, Esera was a celibate zealot, as Voyan had pointed out on Khan's ship. Never in her life had she been called beautiful before. She'd always thought she was plain and simple, like a Jedi detached from worldly matters ought to be. *I'm not really a Jedi, though, am I?*

A parade of slaves brought in dinner, and Esera was glad to see it wasn't Nemoidian cuisine. The private banquet was heavy with meat, and the King explained that Zygerrians were primarily carnivores when they could be. Grains, vegetables and fruits were for the plebeians living in the canyons below the mesa that the palace and houses of the wealthy were built on. Treated to a sensory delight she'd neither smelled nor tasted before, Esera couldn't help but try some of everything. Once the slaves in the kitchen were free, she might have to hire them, with money she would extort from Grievous or die trying. *No more field rations!* The only thing that went wrong was her inability to elegantly use her utensils. If she couldn't even pick up a fork without the threat of a spam or sudden stiffness, she might as well be useless in a lightsaber fight. *Was the reattachment supposed to be this bad? The droid only said there'd be some limited movement...*

King Atai kept up his charm barrage throughout the meal, while his elder son watched with amusement. The younger one just seemed bored, and got himself dismissed at the first opportunity. The other one left not long after, citing his studies, leaving just the King and Esera in the room. And Captain Armin, standing discretely against the wall, hidden in the shadows. "Sono's too young to care about the subtleties of making friends," Atai said. "Hordem seems to be more serious about his future, thankfully."

"It's a good skill to have, making friends," Esera agreed. "Without friends, we're nothing."

"Without love, we're nothing," said Atai, breaking out the wine. "And what is friendship but an extension of love?"

A slaver speaking of love, how ironic, thought Esera, tasting alcohol for the first time in her life. It took every bit of Jedi discipline in her not to make a face when the wine hit her tongue. *People drink this willingly!?* "I suppose you're right, your highness," Esera said.

"I'm right about a great many things," said Atai, staring at her from over his wineglass. "I told Miraj that her little ploy with Skywalker was never going to work. He was manipulating her to buy time, he never cared about her. You can't force someone to love you, but she was so convinced she could... Right up until the moment he killed her. It's a sad thing."

"Very sad," said Esera. Whenever she finished the wine in her glass, Atai just poured more for her. Esera knew she should probably stop, but the more she had, the more she began to like the gave her something to do while the Atai rambled on. Her head was spinning and she was feeling less on edge than before. *I should probably be drunk right now,* thought Esera. But she had eaten a lot at dinner. Hopefully that'd delay the onset of intoxication, the last thing she needed to do was something monumentally stupid while drunk. Was the King trying to lure her into such a situation? Was that why he wanted her drunk? Maybe this was some kind of trap, to get her to reveal all her secrets. Esera looked at the rug on the floor, and tried to lift its corner with the Force, but she couldn't focus enough to do it. *Hmm, that's not optimal,* she thought.

"You're good company, Lady Komara," said the King. "Why don't we carry on this conversation in someplace more... private?"

"Private?" asked Esera, not sure when their one-sided conversation had arrived at this point.

"Yes, private," Atai said. "I would like to... get to know you more."

But before anything more happened, one of the B2s lumbered into the room, causing Armin to jump in surprise. "Lady Komara," the battle droid said, "you are receiving a priority transmission from Minntooine."

"Minntooine?" asked Esera. "Why the hell is Grievous still there? What's that horrible cyborg want now?"

"It is a priority transmission," said the droid.

King Atai's eyes narrowed, but he didn't contest the droid. He stood up and offered Esera his hand. "Come, my lady," he said, helping her to her feet. "Don't keep the good General waiting. Armin, escort her to her quarters." He lowered his voice, so that Esera could hardly hear him. "No one so much as lays a finger on her tonight, do you understand?"

"Of course, your highness," said Armin, taking Esera by the elbow as she swayed on her feet. The dutiful Zygerrian took her back, and saw her safely inside. "Have a good night, my lady," he said, with another bow.

"Yeah, you too," mumbled Esera, closing the door. Her stomach was starting to hurt and she felt light-headed. *Is this alcohol poisoning?* She bumped into R8, who beeped sharply. "Hey... Grievous has a message for me, right? Priority transmission?"

The hologram that appeared was not the horrible cyborg, though. It was Khan, garbled and static-filled. "Esera Komara," Khan said, "this is exactly why I had you keep an open channel down there."

"You're not Grievous," said Esera, squinting at the droid.

"This transmission is routed through Minntooine, to deceive the Zygerrians," said Khan. "Do you realize what I have just done for you?"

"No?"

"Are you aware of what often happens when powerful men of unscrupulous morality get naive, intoxicated young women alone?"

Esera blinked. "Huh? I wasn't alone, that Captain Armin guy was there."

Khan tilted his head, and the points of light in his photoceptors dimmed. "Esera Komara, do not be obtuse. You heard what he was asking you, did you not?"

"I think?"

"Organics!" Khan snapped, very organically. With that, the transmission ceased.

"Whatever, droid," sighed Esera. "Hey, Faera, you around?" she asked.

The Twi'lek girl emerged from the possible meditation room. "Yes, mistress?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. She must have been dozing off.

"Can you show me how this, uh, bathtub works?" asked Esera. "Do I just... turn it on?"

"Leave it to me, mistress." Faera drew the bath for her, carried away in her eagerness to serve. For that, Esera was silently grateful; she felt like she was about to trip over her own feet whenever she moved. All that food must have delayed the alcohol's effect, it was getting worse by the moment. *How strange that Zygerrian hospitality is the greatest I've encountered yet. What a weird place I've come to. Amazing food. Horrific social norms.* Things only got weirder when Faera began undressing her. Apparently that was just something slaves did. "Trust me, my lady, I'd rather be doing this for you than anyone else in this palace," said Faera. Then she asked, more guardedly: "This *is* just a regular bath, right?"

"Yeah... what else would it be?" asked Esera.

"Nothing, my lady," said Faera, the sudden tension gone from her voice. "It's just a bit too late in the night for special services, if you ask me."

The bath really was nice, that was for sure. Esera remembered when she'd been on Shumavar, and they'd fought for two weeks through a city, not even stopping to shower. Cleanliness was the cornerstone of civilization, Esera decided.

I hate this, Kronaak thought. It was another episode of Lifeform Resources in General Grievous's Weekly Strategy Meeting holoprogram, and Kronaak was one of many actors – and actresses, now – drafted into it. Their business here was some of the most boring business in waging a war. The meetings had turned into conferences, and then into something bigger, and the officers of the fleet had agreed to move their gathering into their ship's respective auditoriums where possible to facilitate the introductions of new sub-officers. Kronaak felt like he was attending a meet-and-greet in a university lecture hall, not a council of war.

Grievous's hologram was interrogating each and every new hologram. Kronaak had stopped paying attention a while ago. Some of the others shared his boredom, like Helnurath the Stenax, who still was heading the Serenno fleet despite his grumblings about not being let off his leash. The expectation was that all the admirals find new officers to replace the T-series tactical droids who were being pushed far beyond their programming. Kronaak had found no one, because most lifeforms avoided ten-limbed crab-like monsters who weighed several hundred kilograms and stood well over two meters tall. He'd always been a loner away from his people, anyway.

The super tactical droids were also attending. All the space-specialized K-types were present, including the famed right-arm of Dooku, Kraken, and elusive pirate and spymaster, Khan. The droids rarely spoke, and endured the proceedings with the patience only machines could muster. Kronaak wondered if he could go sit with them. His name was spelled with the *kril* letter in standard galactic Aurebesh, after all.

At length, the murmur of conversing holograms died down, and everyone turned their attention to the front of the room, where the ethereal blue Grievous stood.

"I am less displeased with your progress than I anticipated," Grievous said to the assembly. "Continue with your efforts. Anyone not in the upper strategy council is dismissed."

Three quarters of the holograms winked out, leaving the usual suspects: the General himself, Hithlu, Mar Tuuk, Rame Cartroll, Pors Tonith, Ricimer Eemon, Alzar Khwaramenes, Helnurath, and of course, Kronaak. But there was tenth hologram: Khan the super tactical droid. "What is your report, Khan?" asked Grievous.

"Operation Heist is proceeding as I have predicted, General," Khan answered.

Ah, Operation Heist, Kronaak thought. *That unlikely little scheme to annex Zygerria and the Corporate Sector diplomatically.* Khan spoke on:

"Agent Komara's chances of peacefully negotiation Zygerria's annexation and abolition of slavery remain slim. She would have had a better chance if she'd used her physical charms on King Atai, a man of unscrupulous character, but I determined this would be against her personal code and interceded."

"*Interceded?*" asked Grievous, eyes narrowed.

"Yes, General. The Zygerrian king was making advances as well as moving to isolate her while her judgment was not at its best. If Agent Komara decides physical charm is the best course of action here, that will be her choice. As it stands, I did not believe her to be in a condition to make that choice, and interceded to separate her from the king."

The officers exchanged a chain of glances. *A droid that cares,* thought Kronaak. *How odd.*

"I would have burnt that planet to ash by now," growled Grievous.

"General, I am confident that Komara will be able to take care of herself. Our contingency is in place, and they have not realized she has a secret weapon," said Khan.

"I want my agent back alive, Khan," Grievous said.

"If I have to go down there myself, I shall," Khan said. "I have made extensive modifications to my combat subroutines."

"Self-modifying droids," Tonith muttered, shaking his head. "There's something dangerous."

Khan's beaked face turned to the Muun, his three red photoceptors glowing. "My primary directive is assuring the victory of the Confederacy, sir," he said. "I cannot modify that."

"Let us pray not," said Rame Cartroll. "The last thing we need are treasonous droids. We've got too many traitors already!"

"Report anything of importance, Khan," Grievous said, dismissing the droid. The cyborg looked over the remaining officers. "On the subject of traitors, you all should be aware that I am taking active measures to deal with them. This government is riddled with spies and sabotuers, but not for much longer. You may have noticed our code encryptions have changed."

"That I did, sir," said Khwaramenes. The Givin often had eyes for such numerical matters, Khwaramenes was living up to the stereotype. "Very Carammite, sir, in its paranoia."

"Carammite indeed," said Eemon, smirking.

Grievous continued on. "We have a new agency in the government. I am calling it the Office of Safety and Information. That name was not my first choice, but I was told that these things require... subtlety." The word was said with great distaste, giving way to an annoyed growl. Some things about the General hadn't changed at all, Kronaak was glad to see.

"The Office of Safety and Information, huh?" Helnurath asked.

"That sounds like it could be anything," said Tuuk.

"Exactly," Hithlu said, clasping his hands. "You're hiding them in plain sight, aren't you, General?"

"Yes, that is the idea," Grievous said. "I would have preferred not to hide them at all."

"Who is *them*?" asked Helnurath. The huge Stenax might have been a competent warrior, but Kronaak had the feeling he got lost in subtleties even worse than Grievous did.

"*They're* a secret police," Kronaak said, recalling his time on his homeworld. "General Tar-Mairon had quite the force on Siskeen, before the war."

"Siskeenese!" scoffed Eemon, waving a hand. "Thugs and crooks with badges! No sense of professionalism at all!"

"I take it you're the one behind this exercise in authoritarianism?" asked Cartroll, sneering at his fellow human.

"Of course I am," Eemon said. "To win this war, we need to hit the Republic where they least expect it. How do we hit the Republic without them knowing where we will strike, if they can see our every move? And that's to say nothing of the mass-sabotage of our war materiel!"

"The Metalorn embarrassment has been resolved with utmost prejudice," Grievous said. "The other foundries and shipyards will soon be brought in line with the new standards for personnel and product quality."

"Does utmost prejudice mean summary executions, General?" Cartroll asked, in a carefully neutral voice.

"Yes," Grievous said. He stared down the man until Cartroll looked away. "I am sure the mewling civilians would demand fair trials and legal rights for spies and saboteurs, but I have no time for such nonsense. This is war. Traitors meet a traitor's fate. No matter who they are." The cyborg's gaze swept over the officers, and the point was not lost on any of them. "Admiral Hithlu, what is *Cataclysm's* status?"

"Captain Hatha made port at Charros last week, and put on a nice show for Republic Intelligence. Some of his crew got conveniently drunk during the overnight stay, and mentioned for all to hear that they had orders to attack Republic forces along the Perlemian Trade Route. Which is quite believable, that's a major hyperlane leading straight to the Tion cluster, our heartland, so to speak. Of course, the next day, Captain Hatha revealed that his real orders were to continue nuisance raids in the Core and the Colonies." Hithlu smiled happily, and folded his hands on the unrendered desk that he must have been sitting at, wherever his ship was now. "He's waited five days for the Republic to reposition what forces they are willing to, as his crew honestly believed the Perlemian was their objective, and if they met any undercover Jedi, there would be no deception from them. As of several hours ago, *Cataclysm* should now be making her attacks on various staging grounds, shipyards, and transport hubs."

"Very good," said Grievous. "They were hesitant to pursue Helnurath's fleet, during the failed coup attempt. They are afraid of leaving themselves open for another Coruscant. We will exploit this fear."

"It's like a game of sinusoidal ball," said Khwaramenes. He looked at his fellow officers, and realized he'd have to explain. "Um, back home, we play a game where we have a ball on an elastic string, attached to a paddle, and we hit the ball with the paddle... The winner is the one who can maintain the most steady amplitude and period. Of the distance the ball achieves from the paddle, and how quickly, that is." The hall remained silent. "What I mean is that this whole war is like a game, we move coreward, they counterattack and move rimward, then we count-counterattack and coreward again. It's sinusoidal. Kind of." The Givin wilted under the utter lack of reaction from the officers.

"What is an amplitube?" asked Helnurath. Tuuk covered his face with his hands.

"*Amplitude*," corrected Pors Tonith. "Didn't you ever take a math class?"

"I'm a warrior, not a scholar!"

"A game, he says," Grievous muttered, staring off into the distance. "What game were you playing, Si-?" The cyborg stopped himself in the mid-syllable.

"Sir?" asked Hithlu.

"Never mind," said Grievous, giving him a dismissive wave. "I want all of you to begin identifying critical chokepoints for the Republic's logistics in your regions. We need to buy as much time as we can for the fruits of Komara and Khan's mission to pay off."

"Is the situation that dire, sir?" asked Kronaak.

"Skullface, tell them," ordered Grievous.

"I have been running the numbers for days," Khwaramenes said. "We have a limited window of time in which we can avoid total defeat." His hand flew to a keypad somewhere out of the holoprojector's render, and a series of graphed lines appeared before the Givin. "Republic ship production has been on a slowing trend for the past three months. Their escort ship production has almost entirely stopped, while their star destroyer production has slowed as they re-equip their yards for the new *Imperator*-class. For every *Venator* that leaves its yard, there is a pause of several weeks as they bring in the new schemata and tools, and develop new instructions for the work crews. Some yards aren't big enough for the new class and need to be expanded, which can take another month or two. Only the assault ships and light craft are in steady construction at the moment. As you can see here," Khwaramenes pointed to where a red line and a blue line intersected, "for a time, the Republic's industrial capacity will be surpassed by ours despite its overall strength. This is a disaster for them. Clearly, Palpatine gambled on ending the war in two and a half months between Coruscant and today."

"Now, factor in the new material gains from Komara and Khan's mission," said Grievous.

The lines shifted, the blue one's slow decline shooting suddenly up, while the red one's curving dip remained the same, before rising again to meet the blue. "Assuming Komara and Khan succeed, we will see a significant boost to our own productivity. Starting thirty-six days from now, the Confederacy will be outproducing the Republic's shipyards. If Operation Heist fails, we have two months of productive superiority. If it succeeds, we'll have almost four months. This anticipated one hundred and eight day period will determine the fate of the Confederacy."

The hall was silent again, as they thought on those very weighty words. Grievous was the one to break it. "We have on month to terrorize their inner systems and drive their fleets coreward. After that, we go on the offensive.

Author's note: I was seriously thinking about calling this chapter "Stranger Danger," but even I have some tact. That Atai Molec, he's a nasty guy, folks. You just know he had such plans for Ahsoka, in that skimpy slave outfit, under his total control, completely tamed... Xenophiles, not even once. Oh, speaking of Togruta qts, do you know what 1% of 50,000 is? It's 500. And what's 1% of 500? 5. I think it's well within the margin of error for even one Togruta slave to have been left behind by the Kenobi-Skywalker-Ahsoka mission.

And really, Timewatch? Are you really setting up the next plot arc before this one's even done? Yes, I am. The truth is, reader, I was a hack from the start.

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